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C O N F I D E N T I A L QUITO 001024

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: ECUADORIAN JOINT CHIEF VOWS CONTINUED U.S.
ENGAGEMENT

REF: QUITO 962

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Positive atmospherics surrounded the Ambassador's initial call on new Ecuadorian Joint Forces Commander Admiral Manuel Zapater, the admiral recalling fondly their years-earlier meetings in Guayaquil. Zapater promised continued Ecuadorian security collaboration with the United States. The GoE would not abandon its northern frontier, he assured, but rather sought U.S.-provided intelligence to allow a better focused border defense. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) Ten days into his tenure, Zapater welcomed the Ambassador for a May 4 courtesy call; instead of the service chiefs, their chiefs of staff accompanied the Ecuadorian admiral. Unlike similar gatherings, the atmosphere was informal and friendly, owing to a relationship forged during the Ambassador's many visits to Guayaquil.

13. (C) Zapater promised his command would seek even closer relations with its U.S. counterpart. An example was ANSEC, the Southcom-sponsored conference of Andean nations' military leaders, slated for Guayaquil and Galapagos in November. Ecuador had pushed hard to host the conference, which before had left Miami only once; Zapater promised his forces' full engagement with regional neighbors.

14. (C) Turning his focus north, the Admiral emphasized that Ecuador had no intention of rolling back its augmented force posture along the Colombian frontier. "We won't get involved in Plan Colombia," he asserted, but would remain vigilant to the threats posed by Colombian narcoterrorists. Ecuador's soldiers and marines were well-trained, equipped and committed; what they lacked was actionable intelligence. Zapater hoped the United States might provide what his forces needed.

15. (C) The Ambassador repeated our well-worn refrain that neither Colombia nor the United States wanted the GoE "involved" in Plan Colombia, an initiative designed "por y para" (for and by) Colombians. Ecuador's security forces must protect Ecuadorian sovereignty and territory from narcoterrorist incursions. Careful not to promise intelligence, owing to complex U.S. legalities, she noted that various USG entities might be willing to assist.

16. (C) Southcom commander General Bantz Craddock would make a return visit to Ecuador in June, the Ambassador revealed. Craddock sought to travel north and witness the difficult terrain and harsh climate that challenged Ecuadorian troops along the frontier. He also wished to see U.S. assistance first-hand, whether it be donated Humvees or USAID water projects. The Ambassador hoped Zapater and/or his staff might accompany.

17. (C) COMMENT: Zapater is a known quantity; we did not expect major policy swings from him, nor much strategic vision. We worried, however, that clamoring from Palacio's left and nationalist wings might prompt the high command to retrench and perhaps retreat somewhat from the border. The admiral raising his commitment to the north therefore surprised us, but pleasantly. With the Craddock visit, we hope to lobby him further on the benefits of close U.S. relations and the need to fortify the frontier.

KENNEY